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# Unlike most top 100 cities, Providence losing population

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By Chester Smolski

Given the recent history of population decline in Providence and other large cities throughout New England, one might think that major cities throughout the country are also losing population. Not so.

Before analyzing cities across the country, it is necessary to provide some data on Providence for comparative purposes. Providence population peaked at 253,504 in 1940 just before World War II, when it contained 35.6 percent of the state's population. At the last census in 1980, the city's population stood at 156,804—16.6 percent of the total state population—having suffered a loss of 96,700 people, or an average loss of 2418 people each year for 40 years.

From 1980 to 1985, the state Division of Planning has estimated that the city's population dropped to a low of 153,600, but the population has increased since then for the first time in 45 years, to 158,700 in 1987. This places Providence about 100th in size among cities in the United States.

There are three interesting findings that can be gleaned from the US Census figures on the 75 largest cities in the nation:

- A majority of the cities gained population.
- There is a distinctive regional pattern in the distribution of cities that gained and lost population.
- Annexation plays an important role in explaining city population growth.

## 75 largest cities

The 75 largest cities in the nation ranged from top-ranked New York City at 7.2 million to 75th-ranked Riverside, Calif., at 197,000. From 1980 to these latest 1986 figures, 50 of the 75 cities gained population, or two-thirds of the total. Although most increases were less than 10 percent, Mesa, Ariz., and Arlington, Texas, experienced greatest percentage increases, at 55 percent and 54 percent respectively.

The six cities in the nation that had more than 1 million people in 1980 (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia and Detroit) have been joined by San Diego and Dallas, and by the next census in 1990, San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Ariz., will likely join this list of "millionaire" cities.

The second significant finding in this listing is the locational pattern of the cities; on a map, distribution is quite revealing. The northeast corner of the country contains most of the 25 cities that lost population from 1980 to 1986. Ten were in the Midwest and six in the Northeast. Of the seven in the South, four were adjacent to the Midwest and Northeast. Only Portland, Ore., and Seattle in the West lost population. Described another way, 19 of the 25 cities that lost population were east of the Mississippi River and only six were to the west.

Of the cities that gained population from 1980 to 1986, only two were in the Northeast (Boston and New York), and five were in the Midwest. Half of these gaining cities were in the South, and of these 25, eight were in Texas and four in Florida. California has 11 of the 75 largest cities in the nation, and all of them are gaining in population.

## Changing land area

Perhaps the most interesting finding in this listing of cities is the changing land area of these cities. To a New Englander, the idea of annexation of land by a city is virtually unknown, but this practice is common throughout the country and should be considered when explaining city population growth.

In New England, almost all land is owned and controlled by some type of incorporated town or city, with some state-owned land interspersed among them. There is no county-owned land. Throughout the nation, county-owned land is common and is normally unincorporated. Therefore, as incorporated villages, towns and cities come into being and expand, it is necessary for them to annex adjacent county land.

Annexation laws vary among the states, and Texas has some of the most easily implement-

ed. From 1980 to 1986 in Texas, all of the eight large cities experienced some land area changes.

Although Rhode Island towns and cities cannot, for all practical purposes, annex surrounding land, this practice did take place in the past. In early history of the state, Providence owned much of the northern part of the state but gave up this land as new communities came into being. But as Providence experienced its own growth, it was able to re-annex surrounding land from North Providence, Cranston and Johnston.

## 'The Annex'

This annexation process started after the Civil War, when Providence had a land area of only 5.4 square miles. Starting in 1868 and ending in 1919, eight annexations brought Providence over 13 square miles of territory from these three communities. Some local West Enders in Providence still refer to "The Annex," the last annexation from Johnston.

Some history books claim that these annexations also doubled the city's population because some of the land was populated, but some was also open and rural. But there is no question that during the 60 years from 1860 to 1920, the city experienced a dramatic increase in population, a considerable portion of which can be ascribed to annexation.

In 1860, the city of 5.4-square miles contained 174,620 residents, or 29 percent of the state's population. Sixty years and eight annexations later, the population was 237,595, or 39 percent of the entire state. These annexations provided more land for further growth of the city.

As annexations have taken place in the past in this part of the nation, so now this same phenomenon is taking place throughout the rest of the United States. In 1986, for example, more than 800 square miles and nearly 250,000 people were annexed to municipalities of more than 5000 population.

## Annexation laws

Rapidly growing Texas and California, with their easy annexations laws, led the nation from 1980 to 1986. Texan communities annexed 890 square miles and 240,000 people, while California cities and towns annexed 426 square miles and 216,000 people.

The most recent major annexation took place in Colorado Springs, Colo., which had already increased its land area by 33 percent from 1980 to 1985. This year it annexed 24,312 acres, a 25 percent increase of land area.

It should also be mentioned that detachments can also take place. This commonly occurs when courts rule annexations invalid and communities are forced to return this land. Vail, Colo., for example, last year gave up 1.1 square miles and over 1000 people that it had annexed the previous year.

Of the 75 largest cities in the period from 1980 to 1985, 36 annexed land and three experienced detachments.

## National figures relative

Of the 50 cities that gained population, 31 also annexed land, while the land area of 17 gaining cities remained the same and two had detachments. Of the 25 cities that lost population, 19 had no land area change, five annexed land and one had a detachment.

A New Englander looking at national population figures for cities must always keep in mind that some of that growth may be directly related to land annexation, a phenomenon that does not take place here. Or conversely, when cities such as Providence lose population, it may be because they are not able to annex surrounding land.

Given the problems of large American cities in the past and the resultant flight of population away from these urban nodes, the figures for our 75 largest cities now show that the majority are growing in population and nearly one-half are also adding land for potential future growth. These are encouraging signs for our urban centers.

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